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THE VERY LAST BATTLE

NECROPOLITICS CAPITALISM, LEFTIST, REVOLUTION, WORK

Before the financial crises, the normal political situation was that there was capitalism on the one hand and a tiny but unshakeable radical left that wanted to abolish it on the other. That was also my organisation, by the way. We remained a protest movement long after it had ceased to exist. Then the Eastern bloc collapsed. No problem for us, we had learnt to live with setbacks. Nobody could do us any harm, we were just too small. Dwarves have an advantage when it comes to sharp shooting because they are difficult to hit. Back then, we had the same dream as all the little ones: When we grow up, we'll be something really great. For example, a racing driver, test pilot, polar explorer, film star. Or even a revolutionary.

This is usually a short-lived dream. The little ones grow up quickly, and by the time they have

to go to school at the latest, they start comparing their goals with the available opportunities. Then realism gradually takes hold. For the revolutionary left, however, the dreaming never stopped. Because the revolutionary left did not grow, but shrank.

The film ran backwards. The older we got, the more childish we became. We were the little boy who desperately wanted to be a pianist but was never allowed to strum and never realised that he had perhaps brought the wrong paws into the world for the job.

The goal of one day abolishing capitalism and replacing it with socialism could be fantasised about as much as one wanted, because there was no reality against which these fantasies could have rubbed up against. The revolutionary left did not need to worry about how this socialism they longed for would actually work. After all, it would never get that far.

Real revolutionaries are full of impatience and always in a hurry, time is pressing. We had all the time in the world, the welfare state doesn't let its revolutionaries starve. We just dreamed a little. Unrealisable dreams are the most beautiful, because they can never collide with reality.

What were we actually thinking back then, I sometimes ask myself. Did we think about anything at all? Was the socialism we were talking about actually an idea, or was it not more of a thoughtless fancy, comparable to the longing for lonely palm beaches on tropical islands that arises on cold, grey November days in the pre-Christmas hustle and bustle, where you would go mad after three days if you had to live there?

Were we as deluded as the small investors during the dotcom hype? Was socialism just a speculative bubble in the end? What was the difference between our belief in the miracle that a proletarian revolution would bring about and the belief in the miracle of small investors who hoped that a technology would bring sudden wealth for everyone precisely because they didn't understand it?

How similar we were back then, we left-wing radicals and the small shareholders who were left in the lurch. We drew certainty from ignorance, cluelessness inspired our dreams, our shared dream of the land of milk and honey. The glued small investors and we were one common goal and two different ways to get there. Neither of us got there.

We believed that we had two aces up our sleeves, the proletariat and the revolution. That's why there was no need for us to worry about the details. The idea was something like this: If we push the workers hard and put them on the right track, they'll rock the boat. After all, the proletariat was the revolutionary class, as we understood Marx.

So you just had to get the workers to start moving in the first place. They would then find the right direction all by themselves, because the revolutionary class, as the name suggests, can do nothing but revolution. And when that is finished, socialism will emerge: each according to his needs, each according to his abilities, and everyone will love each other. All's well that ends well.

Thanks to such illusions, we managed the feat of leading a well-behaved, risk-free life and feeling like revolutionaries fighting for socialism to the last drop of blood. Because as far as we were concerned, this struggle was purely a propaganda war.

Even if there were actions, they were nothing but propaganda, propaganda of the deed in this

case, in the case of the RAF a show with real deaths. After all, the total amount of personal injury and property damage caused by the RAF was only a fraction of the difference between personal injury and property damage in road traffic on one Easter weekend with good (more) weather and another with bad (less) weather. The actions themselves were meaningless, what mattered was the media response, which the organisers hoped would mobilise the population. This did happen, but it was not the intended mobilisation.

What would have really hurt the system, namely striking and occupying factories – and risking our jobs in the process – was something we radical left-wing revolutionaries couldn't do because we weren't workers.

And the workers who could have done it didn't do it because they weren't radical left-wing revolutionaries. Only those who were protected by their objective incapacity from ever having to prove their will by deed believed they wanted to make revolution. In other words: the condition of the longing for socialism was its unrealisability.

The division of roles, that those who wanted to could not, and those who could would not, functioned as a guarantee of existence. It was guaranteed that with capitalism, the task of the radical left-wing revolutionaries to abolish capitalism would remain with us forever.

You could study Marx in peace for a lifetime without having to fear suddenly becoming unemployed from one day to the next because a revolution had abolished capitalism.

The greatest occupational risk for Marxists is that capitalism is actually abolished. After all, he has many years of training as a critic of capitalism behind him and has often not learnt any other profession. What is he supposed to do all day long, what use is he if capitalism no longer exists? It is a kind of law of nature that revolutions, if they are to succeed, must eat their fathers; Moses, as we know, was only allowed to see the Promised Land, but not to enter it. And who wants to be eaten?

Every social critic, if he is honest, has already had to ask himself how he would fare if he were swallowed up in a perfect world. And the honest answer is: it would be pure hell. It follows that you should never blindly trust social critics. They are attached to their profession, they need the wrong society, the object of their criticism, more urgently than anyone else.

Of course, they also suffer from the wrong society, but this suffering also provides pleasure and gives meaning to their lives, so we can assume that they have an underlying interest in preserving the source of pleasure and meaning.

It was probably similar for us, the left-wing radicals. We didn't make revolution, we saw it as our task to denounce capitalism in word and writing. That's not forbidden, and if you do it well, you even get paid for it. At least as long as elegantly formulated criticism of capitalism remains fun for the dying educated classes and does not resonate with either the functional elites or the masses.

Let's take the magazine Konkret as an example. Every month for almost 40 years now, the editor has written the ruling class into the dustbin, along with everything that goes with it. When I joined in the 1980s, I managed to broaden the front even further: the ecopaxes, anti-Americanism and anti-Semitism of the left, Germanophilia and the desire for reunification

were my specialities. A lot happened politically during this period, but absolutely nothing that could be interpreted as an effect of Konkret articles, no matter how much imagination you put into it.

That was no surprise. We couldn't have been so stupid as to expect success in the multi-front war, which raises the question of what we actually wanted. Perhaps to show the others that we could think, write and read better than they could. Nobody was bothered by this, such competition is good for business and in this case even culturally valuable and desirable.

What have we achieved? Germany has been reunified. The poor got poorer and the rich got richer. Gremliza is allowed to talk about his life for an hour and a half on Deutschlandfunk radio and confess his love of the German language.¹⁶ And once again I give a lecture. This is the result of 40 years of revolution at my desk.

So for the producers of left-wing radicalism in text form, the business is somewhat profitable, albeit not well. But how do patrons and customers benefit? Why do people support and buy the stuff?

The established could, for example, benefit from the promotion and consumption of left-wing radicalism in text form. In the monotony of millionaires, a left-wing radical stands out among them like a colourful dog – it's a pity that only a few wealthy people in Germany want to afford this inexpensive luxury.

In general, we should ask what the actual function of left-wing radicalism is in a society in which it obviously cannot fulfil its declared function of bringing about a revolution. What is the point of being a left-wing radical? Just the hope of a miracle in the distant future?

Not even the followers of religions are that selfless and spiritualised; faith must already bring benefits in this life if it is to be believed, not just in heaven. What could be the advantages of left-wing radicalism apart from orientation, affiliation and community, as any football club would have to offer?

Firstly, of course, the aforementioned gain in distinction. But you have to have come a long way to get that. Left-wing radicalism doesn't do much for vagrants and welfare recipients; they are accused of envy and other base motives. With the academic proletariat, the yield is even lower, and not much better with the middle classes. The T-shirts, which the publisher offers for 20 euros and with which the wearer outs himself as a Konkret fan, are therefore unlikely to be a big hit. A left-wing radical should already be a millionaire so that the public pays attention to him and no-one doubts the nobility and integrity of his motives.

What is perhaps more important is that left-wing radicalism can also provide help in life and comfort the soul. How this works can be analysed quite well using the example of the magazine Konkret. The editor stylises himself as a man who gave up a top job at Der Spiegel and threw a stellar career to the wind because he didn't want to be bent. Now, hypothetical alternative careers are always fiction. Nobody knows in advance whether a Spiegel career will take place and whether it will end in the boss's chair or in a drunken asylum.

But it doesn't matter, because Gremliza has proven often enough that he can actually write, not only in his polished columns and in gremlizas express, but also as the ghostwriter of

various Wallraff titles that became bestsellers. The ideal Spiegel man, in other words, and that's why you buy his version of a story that could have been considerably more complicated than the rhyme he makes of it.

This story makes him the ideal identification figure for the many who feel ignored and left behind and struggle with their fate because they believe they deserved a better job than they got.

After all, life as a citizen is anything but a bed of roses because the damn competition never sleeps. The struggle for existence is not just called that, it is one; injuries and defeats are unavoidable. When dealing with defeats, it helps to turn them into a moral victory, along the lines of "I'm too good for this bad world, too decent, honest, sincere, principled, qualified." After the third glass of wine at the latest, anyone in professional life, no matter how high up, can tell a variation of this story.

For left-wingers, it sounds something like this: "If I had grovelled and betrayed my political convictions, I would have made a career for myself and would have long since become a professor or editor-in-chief or more."

But the opposite is true. The number of yes-sayers is huge, the competition enormous and overwhelming, in the small no-sayer niche the chances of promotion are much better. In the left-wing party, you can still become the chairman of a local branch at the age of 40 as a career changer, whereas in the CDU you have to have been in the Junge Union and become a good string-puller to get this measly job.

The distortion of facts helps both the writers and the readers. The latter become subscribers when left-wing radicalism becomes an aid to life and can be consumed thanks to this functionality. Subscribers as such are people who do not expect a revolution but trust that nothing will ever change in their lives, not even their address. You could even make a living from them as a radical left-wing writer, and not even badly.

And if you couldn't, if you didn't get any money for writing, you weren't driven to the barricades by a growling stomach. The welfare state took care of that, and in the affluent society, even the poor get something, so you just get the shelf from the rubbish bin instead of Ikea.

That's how it was in the good old days. Capital made profits, we lived from denouncing this, routinely and in a way that was guaranteed to have no consequences. The capitalists were rich, but the bad guys, we weren't rich, but the good guys, everyone was happy and content, and no one bit the other's throat or scratched their eyes out.

After the thirtieth xenophobic offence committed by right-wing extremists, the only exciting question was whether the columnist would manage to come up with something new on this age-old topic.

Nevertheless, we would probably have lasted quite a while longer if the financial crises of 2008 and 2011 had not materialised. They brought about the collapse of a world for the left, a world in which they had had a nice unique selling point with their declared desire to abolish capitalism.

Suddenly we had competition. Anything can be taken from citizens, but never their savings. Anyone who tampers with them makes an enemy of them. Consequently, after the Lehman bankruptcy, capitalism no longer had any friends, and the frustrated did not turn their hearts into murder pits, but took to the streets. With demonstrations, human chains and tent camps, they showed capital how little they thought of it.

Capital didn't care, but it was shocking for the radical left. Suddenly we had our image before our eyes, a double, but magnified two hundred thousand times. And human beings are built in such a way that they immediately recognise the same mistakes they overlook in themselves when strangers make them.

Propagandistic anti-capitalism had always been a whingeing tirade, but only now was it really noticeable. It sounded something like this: "Capital, you stole my savings, give it back!" "Capital, you're the meanest of all greedy vultures!" "Capital, you've made me unemployed, because of you I can no longer pay my instalments!" "Capital, because of you I'm now sitting on the street instead of in my family home like I used to!"

All very amusing. At least for the trained Marxist, who of course knows that capital is not a relationship box, nor is it a fat old cat that wants to be stroked. Withdrawal of love and reproaches are expedient means in marital disputes, but they don't get you anywhere with capital. It doesn't care whether people like it or not. It has no antenna for such signals, it lacks any sense of sentimentality. People should just work and shop. And that's what they do, regardless of the slogans they spout – they have no other choice.

That's why capital is so tolerant. Every unavoidable trip to the supermarket or to work is a vote with the feet that capital can only win. You show your practical consent through your behaviour. Capital doesn't care what kind of attitude you have and cultivate, whether you are a fan of Marx or Bakunin, because politicising is a form of leisure activity. Let the chatterboxes blow off steam after work, as long as they turn up at the office the next morning on time, washed and shaved. And they do, if they are allowed to.

As if to make the whole despondency of the financial crisis-induced anti-capitalism in Western countries abundantly clear, there was also the Arab Spring as a contrasting programme. The demonstrators who occupied Tahir Square in Cairo knew exactly what they wanted, they had a clear and unmistakable demand, namely that Mubarak and his regime should disappear.

But what exactly did the Occupy campers who had set up their tent camps in the city centres want? Or the Blockupy people? I don't know, and I'm sure they didn't and don't know either. Because nobody knows, not even the tiny radical left. What's more, we never knew, we only imagined we knew for 40 years. And when it came, the supposedly long-awaited moment when people would listen to us, we couldn't think of anything.

Only "Make Capitalism History", as it was called at the so-called revolutionary Berlin May Day demonstration in 2012. But people didn't want to know that, and I no longer want to hear or see these slogans, which have about as much substance and commitment as an appeal for disarmament from the UN General Assembly. People want to know, and I want to know too: How?

The financial crisis was a revelation for us. If everyone is against socialism, I'm in favour of it. Being in favour is enough. But if people nod encouragingly, I should be in favour of it. And then it turns out that I don't even know how to do it. Like a child: "Dad, I want to climb the tree." "But you're not allowed to." "But I want to!" "It doesn't even come into the bag." – Wonderful. I lie down on the grass, look up at the sky and visualise how I would hop from branch to branch with the agility of a squirrel – if I could. But then one day my dad says: "Go for it!" – Damn. How do I even get up there? And once I'm up there, how do I get down again?

It's confirmed once again: when the class we call the ruling class sags, we do too, only even more so. We literally collapse when we come under pressure to act because of a crisis or something else. We have simply been fair-weather and prosperity socialists, nothing more.

We are as clueless and helpless as the masses, who become depressed rather than revolutionary during a depression. They don't want a new, different society, they long for the better old days when capitalism guaranteed them prosperity.

The only thing that is still growing in Greece is the suicide rate, a reliable indicator of the mood in the country. The suicide rate is characterised by a sudden drop in the event of revolutions, including outbreaks of war. People then find an external enemy for their aggression and no longer have to direct it against themselves to the point of self-destruction. They regain the feeling that they are not at the mercy of their fate, but can take it into their own hands as a collective through joint action. They feel that they are many and have real power as a mass.

None of the left-wing groups in Greece has succeeded in liberating the aggressiveness lurking behind the dejection and despondency. On the contrary, during the election people decided to eat out of the hands of the very politicians they had previously threatened to send to prison. The crisis is likely to take the same course wherever the situation worsens.

The reason for this is, on the one hand, that there is no concept for functioning socialism and, on the other, the welfare state. You can insult it, you can riot against it, but you have to preserve it.

That's why the demonstrations in Athens, however militant they may have been, were just a spectacle. Because if this welfare state goes bankrupt, civil servants' salaries and pension payments will stop, and because nobody wants that, no government has to fear a coup. You can't slaughter the cow once you've got used to living off its milk.

On the one hand, it is unavoidable to demand the welfare state, but on the other, it does not come for free. The price is a degree of integration into the system that makes a revolution along conventional lines unimaginable. Even if the needy receive little and less and less, as in Greece, the little is still better than nothing. And those who are at the end of their tether would rather kill themselves than shoot the prime minister, because that wouldn't do any good either.

It is therefore worth taking a closer look at how the welfare state works. In addition to providing for the needy, it organises the isolation of people by eliminating the masses. The misery administration, as one could polemically call the social bureaucracy, ensures that misery becomes statistics.

Maudlin portrayals of individual cases – in the feature pages we say moving or touching instead of maudlin, which sounds even more tacky – do nothing to change this. They only help the reading public to feel “how well off I am compared to them”, otherwise they wouldn’t like the unpleasant tales of suffering. Unless you assume a sublime sadism, which of course can also be present and stems from the fact that the middle-class people want to bring some colour into their own bland everyday lives.

The impoverished themselves will reject such stories, and they do well to do so. They no longer need to be educated, they already have been, first-hand, through life. They don’t need to read, they need to act, but the welfare state has gradually robbed them of any chance of doing so as it has become more modern and more comfortable. One example:

The still-common expression “going stamping” comes from a time when the unemployed had to turn up at the job centre every day with their stamp card and have it stamped. Nobody shirked this administrative task because it was linked to the payment of the daily ration of benefits. It goes without saying that there were queues and crowds.

Today’s monthly bank transfer is more convenient, albeit at the cost of an unemployed person being left alone in front of the telly with a discount beer. Without causing a stir or becoming a public nuisance, this case resolves itself over time.

If, on the other hand, a hundred individuals are standing around waiting and feel provoked by the harassing procedure, there may be grumbling and the grumbling may escalate into a riot. It can even happen that individuals perceive themselves as a crowd and act accordingly, for example by dismantling the furniture and storming the counter.

The crowd makes you feel protected and strong, and people think and act differently than they would as individuals. What’s more, you have an audience and, spurred on by it, you can get carried away with statements and actions that you would refrain from if you were alone in front of the counter, behind which the clerk is enthroned like the good Lord. Crowds are always a risk because they can develop an unpredictable momentum of their own.

If such local mass phenomena occur frequently, there is unrest in the air, and you never know in advance exactly what the final outcome will be. It can happen that partial successes encourage the masses to go the whole hog, it can happen that repression incites their anger, but of course it can also happen that a water cannon is enough to cool tempers and then it’s all over. You just don’t know.

That’s why it’s very clever of the social bureaucracy to prevent situations with residual risk from arising in the first place, i.e. to treat the customers in a friendly manner, not to have them turn up all the time, but to transfer the money to their account as if they were still receiving a salary. But they are not, they don’t meet colleagues, a sense of unity only arises at national team football matches. In everyday life, everyone feels as powerless and insignificant as a portion of flyspeck, and not only do they feel that way, but as isolated individuals they are.

The left-wing organiser, who is also a child of the managed world, naturally immediately comes up with a solution: Unemployment initiatives. You have to get people out of their isolation and bring them together again, together we are strong. It’s all just a question of organisation.

But what are the unemployed supposed to do when they come together, when everyone already knows each other's story from their own experience? When they meet in a room that they came to of their own free will, and for which they should even be grateful to the authorities that provided it? Nowhere is there a constraint to resist, nowhere is there a switch that can be dismantled together – how are collective consciousness, solidarity and aggression supposed to develop under such hothouse conditions?

So what are they supposed to do? Read wage labour and capital together? They have neither, and seminars have never been of any use. You need anger and a direct confrontation with the enemy for a revolt, I don't know of any that would have got off the ground without the police.

The consequences of this development can be seen in Greece: on the one hand, a scenario that left-wing radicals and Marxists have always dreamed of: economic crisis, state crisis, mass poverty, mass unemployment. In other words, exactly the right conditions for people to see through the true nature of capitalism and realise that there is no alternative to socialist revolution. On the other hand, however, the revolution has failed to materialise.

This raises the question of whether conventional left-wing radicalism has not been a nostalgia trip that has ignored reality, namely the welfare state and its integration mechanisms as well as an ageing population¹⁷ and organised capitalism, late capitalism, which is very different from the one Marx had in mind. Marx had not known a welfare state at all, and he made extremely disrespectful remarks about the declassed, for example in *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*:

“To be given money and to be pumped money, that was the prospect with which [Louis Bonaparte] hoped to lure the masses. The financial science of the lumpenproletariat, the noble and the common, is limited to giving and pumping.”¹⁸

As a permanently unemployed person who is difficult to place and a recipient of Hartz IV, this unflattering finding can make you wince and ponder whether you should really wish for the victory of the working class.

Marx does not miss the opportunity to go into detail and provide a caustic list without any sympathy, empathy or therapy. He had nothing for marginalised groups, the problem children of the welfare state. He wrote:

“Alongside shattered roués of the aristocracy with ambiguous means of subsistence and of ambiguous origin, alongside debauched and adventurous offshoots of the bourgeoisie vagabonds, discharged soldiers, released penitentiary convicts, runaway galley slaves, crooks, jugglers, lazarons, pickpockets, bagmen, gamblers, maquereaus, brothel keepers, porters, day labourers, organ grinders, rag pickers, scissor grinders, tinkers, beggars, in short the whole indeterminate, disorganised, tossed about mass that the French call *la Bohème*, with this element related to him Bonaparte formed the stock of the society of 10 December. December. ‘Charitable society’ – insofar as all members, like Bonaparte, felt the need to do well at the expense of the labouring nation.”¹⁹

“At the expense of the labouring nation” – only the market radicals in the FDP still think this way today, but not even they dare to say it out loud. Marx had no inhibitions; after all, socialism was conceived as an association of free producers, not as a support fund for

destitute consumers.

Referring to Marx is therefore rather risky, because he was confronted with different circumstances than we find today. Revolutionary romanticism has no chance against the welfare state because the masses who are supposed to abolish it do not want it for obvious reasons.

They don't want to abolish it, they want more of it. Whether they get it depends on how national capital performs in international competition. They have to accept this, and they do.

In general, if you take a closer look, the historical role models are not far off. Perhaps many people felt the same way I did: when it came to the ritual singing of the Internationale at demonstrations or protest rallies, I got through it with my ears covered. I only knew the chorus of the lyrics, the line about the last stand, which somehow reminded me of the Nazis' mythology of the final victory. But what the hell, nobody is perfect, not even the labour movement. To err is human, to forgive is divine.

It would have been better to open your ears and hear:

"Wake up, damned of this earth,
who are always forced to starve."

Here and now only in the emaciation clinic.

Is it really still possible to sing something like that in the FRG and to one's own audience when obesity has become a widespread disease, especially among the lower classes? Was it possible back then, when the German economy was booming because of the rearmament programmes for WWI? I am quoting Emil Luckhardt's version from 1910, the only one I found in Wikipedia.

With the German text of the Internationale, poetry had reached a level from which it could only go upwards – proof that the story of cultural decline is a fairy tale. But that is not the subject here; the subject is the first half of the third verse, which reads:

'In town and country, you working people,

we are the strongest of the parties

Push aside the idlers!

This world must be ours;

So the idlers must go, not the capitalists. Because you can accuse the citizens of anything but laziness. They were the first ruling class in the entire history of the world to come up with the absurd idea that labour does not disgrace people, but ennobles them, something Nietzsche already complained about:

"Labour gets more and more all good conscience on its side: the inclination to pleasure already calls itself 'need of recreation' and begins to be ashamed of itself. 'You owe it to your health' – that's what you say when you're caught out on a country outing. Indeed, it could soon get to the point where you don't give in to a tendency towards *vita contemplativa* (i.e.

going for a walk with thoughts and friends) without self-loathing and a guilty conscience. “20

It is incomprehensible that after concentration camps, above the entrance to which the phrase “Arbeit macht frei” (work sets you free) was written, and after the labour camps in the Soviet Union, someone like Hannes Wader can still sing such nonsense today. And on the website Jusos in Niedersachsen²¹ you can find exactly this text with the note

“Juso-‘Liedgut’

The ‘anthem’ of the Jusos is the ‘Internationale’. The song was composed in 1888 and has been the most widely used song of the international labour movement ever since.”

So we can only learn from the labour movement how not to do things today. There is no tradition that can be continued and there are no role models worth emulating.

Ideological left-wing radicalism, however, assumed their existence; it was the cosy cave into which people fled from the strange, unknown reality, like a clubhouse where the old mates were already sitting, from Thomas Münzer to Che Guevara.

Perhaps it is even salutary that this place went bankrupt as a result of the financial crises.

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